

“Debating Our Destiny” by Lee Banville: Questions to Consider

Chapter One “Do Debates Matter?”

1. After the first 1984 presidential debate, the issue of President Reagan’s age and questions about his ability to lead the country arose. Why did these concerns come up around the debate and not during other parts of the presidential campaign?
2. By the second debate, media analysis about President Reagan’s rambling answers had reached a fevered pitch. In your view, why did President Reagan’s quip about Mondale’s youth and inexperience help dispel speculation he was too old for the job as president?
3. Describe the effect President Reagan’s age comment had on the audience watching the debate. Why did this moment have such a detrimental effect on Mondale’s bid for the presidency?
4. Why might a presidential debate provide an advantage to a challenger over an incumbent? Why might an incumbent accept a challenge to debate in spite of this advantage?
5. Explain whether you feel televised presidential debates serve a purpose in the democratic process.
6. Summarize the positions of Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas on the issue of slavery as expressed in their 1858 Senatorial debates. How did these debates crystallize the issues for voters in the 1860 presidential elections? Which position do you feel would best appeal to voters in 1860 and why?

Chapter Two “Style vs. Substance”

1. Explain why you think either George Bush or Bill Clinton had the more challenging task entering into the debates in October, 1992.
2. How did the town hall format of the second debate create new challenges for the candidates and show them in a different light to voters?

3. Why was Bush's casual glance at his watch so detrimental to his image in the second debate? Explain whether you feel this is a case of style over substance and why.
4. What information about a candidate, beyond his or her policy positions, comes out in a televised debate?
5. Discuss whether presenting debates on television puts more emphasis on style than substance.
6. How do presidential debates show the candidates in a more favorable light to those who don't support them than ads or stump speeches?
7. Discuss whether televised presidential debates are a benefit or disadvantage for voters and why.